

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

September 18, 2000

(Note: These are unedited and uncorrected transcripts)

Chairman Elliott Abrams

Opening Remarks

Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Elliott Abrams, and I serve as the chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. I would like to welcome you to today's hearing on religious freedom and U.S. policy in India and Pakistan. [Introduce other Commissioners present]

We have a very full program today, so I will keep my opening remarks brief.

The Commission on International Religious Freedom was established by Congress with two purposes: to monitor the condition of religious freedom around the world, and to make recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress as to how U.S. policy can most effectively advance religious freedom. The Commission is an independent advisory body appointed by the President and both Houses of Congress but separate from them.

This is the first in a series of hearings on different countries that we plan to conduct over the coming months.

Earlier this month, the State Department issued its Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for the year 2000. The reports on both India and Pakistan reveal grave violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by the governments of those two countries. These violations concern the Commission, and, in addition to turning our own attention to them, we have urged the State Department to monitor the situation closely. I would like to emphasize that by holding hearings today on both countries, the Commission does not intend to try to equate the situations in India and Pakistan, or to compare them to each other or to any other country. The situations in India and Pakistan are entirely distinct and each is extremely complex.

Turning to U.S. policy, in the past two years there have been significant developments in the region and in U.S. policy toward both India and Pakistan. The President's visit earlier this year and Prime Minister Vajpayee's current visit to the United States have raised interest in and awareness of U.S. relations with South Asia. This is precisely the time for the U.S. government to consider how the protection of religious freedom should factor into the development and implementation of U.S. policy, and it is the Commission's mandate to make recommendations to our government in that regard.

It is with respect to U.S. policy that it appears fruitful to consider both India and Pakistan at the same time. Historically, U.S. relations with India and Pakistan have been quite different. Nevertheless, there are a great number of issues that concern both countries, and relations between India and Pakistan have had and will have an impact on shaping U.S. policy toward both.

I would like to say a few words about the understandably sensitive topic of Kashmir. With respect to the on-going conflict in Kashmir, the Commission is studying the impact of that conflict on the protection of religious freedom -- both in India and in Pakistan -- and its importance to U.S. policy. The Commission does not intend take a position on how the conflict should be resolved.

Finally, today's hearings are just one element of the Commission's work with respect to both India and Pakistan. Obviously, with the limited time that we have available for a public hearing, we can only hear about a very small portion of what is going on inside the two countries and in policymaking circles. The Commission is aware that no one group of witnesses can do justice to the complexity of the issues involved and all points of view. For this reason, the Commission and its staff will be consulting with others in the upcoming months, and we hope to visit India and Pakistan to see the situation first-hand. In addition, the Commission is happy to receive and will consider written submissions.

A few words about the structure of the day. There will be two panels before lunch, and one after. The morning panels will be on the religious freedom situation in India and Pakistan, respectively. The afternoon panel will cover U.S. policy with respect to both countries. Due to the size of the first panel on India, it will be split into two parts. Each set of presentations will be followed by questions from the Commissioners. I ask that each presenter keep his testimony to a maximum of 10 minutes. In order to keep things moving along, I will indicate

to the witnesses when your time has expired.

With that said, I would like to welcome our distinguished panelists, some of who have come from South Asia. We look forward to the benefit of your experience and wisdom.